

THE EATER OF DREAMS

By Lafcadio Hearn.

"Alas! how short this night of hours! The Baku will not even have time to eat our dreams!"
—Old Japanese Love-song.

HE name of the creature is Baku, or Shiroki-nakatsukami; and its particular function is the eating of dreams. It is variously represented and described. An ancient book in my possession states that the male Baku has the body of a horse, the face of a lion, the trunk and tusks of an elephant, the forelock of a rhinoceros, the tail of a cow, and the feet of a tiger. The female Baku is said to differ greatly in shape from the male; but the difference is not clearly set forth.

In the time of the old Chinese learning, pictures of the Baku used to be hung up in Japanese houses, such pictures being supposed to exert the same beneficent power as the creature itself. My ancient book contains this legend about the custom:

"In the Shosi-Roku it is declared that Kotel, while hunting on the eastern coast, once met with a Baku having the body of an animal, but speaking like a man. Kotel said: 'Since the world is quiet and at peace, why should we still see goblins? If a Baku be needed to extinguish evil sprites, then it were better to have a picture of the Baku suspended to the wall of one's house. Thereafter, even though some evil Wonder should appear, it could do no harm.'"

Then there is given a long list of evil Wonders, and the signs of their presence:

"When the hen lays a soft egg, the demon's name is TAIFU.

"When snakes appear entwined together, the demon's name is JINZU.

"When dogs go with their ears turned back, the demon's name is TAIYO.

"When the fox speaks with the voice of a man, the demon's name is GWAISHU.

"When blood appears on the clothes of men, the demon's name is YUKI.

"When the rice-pot speaks with a human voice, the demon's name is KANJO.

"When the dream of the night is an evil dream, the demon's name is RINGETSU.

And the old book further observes: "Whenever any such evil marvel happens, let the name of the Baku be invoked: then the evil sprite will immediately sink three feet under the ground."

But on the subject of evil wonders I do not feel qualified to discourse: it belongs to the unexplored and appalling world of Chinese demonology, and it has really very little to do with the subject of the Baku in Japan. The Japanese Baku is commonly known as the Eater of Dreams; and the most remarkable fact in relation to the cult of the creature is that the Chinese character representing its name used to be put in gold upon the lacquered pillows of lords and princes. By the virtue and power of this character on the pillow, the sleeper was thought to be protected from evil dreams. It is rather difficult to find such a pillow today: even pictures of the Baku (or "Hakutaku," as it is sometimes called) have become very rare. But the old invocation to the Baku still survives in common parlance: Baku kura! Baku kura!—"Devour, O Baku! devour my evil dream!" . . . When you awake from a nightmare, or from any unlucky dream, you should quickly repeat that invocation three times;—then the Baku will eat the dream, and will change the misfortune or the fear into good fortune and gladness.

It was on a very sultry night, during the period of the greatest heat, that I last saw the Baku. I had just awakened out of misery; and the hour was the Hour of the Ox; and the Baku came in through the window to ask, "Have you anything for me to eat?"

I gratefully made answer:

"Assuredly! . . . Listen, good Baku to this dream of mine!

"I was standing in some great white-walled room, where lamps were burning; but I cast no shadow on the naked floor of that room,—and there, upon an iron bed, I saw my own dead body. How I had come to die, and when I had died, I could not remember. Women were sitting near the bed,—six or seven,—and I did not know any of them. They were neither young nor old, and all were dressed in black: watchers I took them to be. They sat motionless and silent: there was no sound in the place: and I somehow felt that the hour was late.

"In the same moment I became aware of something nameless in the atmosphere of the room,—a heaviness that weighed upon the will,—some viewless numbing power that was slowly growing. Then the watchers began to watch each other, stealthily; and I knew that they were afraid. Soundlessly one rose up, and left the room. Another followed; then another. So, one by one, and lightly as shadows, they all went out. I was left alone with the corpse of myself.

"The lamps still burned clearly; but terror in the air was thickening. The watchers had stolen away almost as soon as they began to feel it. But I believed that there was yet time to escape;—I thought that I could safely delay a moment longer. A monstrous curiosity obliged me to remain: I wanted to look at my own body, to examine it more closely. . . . I approached it. I observed it. And I wondered—because it seemed to me very long,—unnaturally long. . . .

"Then I thought that I saw one eyelid quiver. But the appearance of motion might have been caused by the trembling of a lamp-flame. I stooped to look—slowly, and very cautiously, because I was afraid that the eyes might open.

"It is Myself," I thought, as I bent down,—and yet, it is growing queer! . . . The face appeared to be lengthening. . . . 'It is not Myself,' I thought again, as I stooped still lower,—and yet, it cannot be any other; And I became much more afraid, unspeakably afraid, that the eyes would open. . . .

"They opened!—horribly they opened!—and that thing sprang,—sprang from the bed at me, and fastened upon me,—moaning and gnawing and rending! Oh! with what madness of terror did I strive against it! But the eyes of it, and the moans of it and the touch of it, sickened; and all my being seemed about to burst asunder in a frenzy of loathing, when—I knew not how—I found in my hand an axe. And I struck with the axe;—I clove, I crushed, I brayed the Moaner,—until there lay before me only a shapeless, hideous, reeking mass,—the abominable ruin of Myself. . . .

"—Baku kura! Baku kura! Devour, O Baku! devour the dream!"

"Nay!" made answer the Baku, "I never eat lucky dreams. That is a very lucky dream,—a most fortunate dream. . . . The axe—yes! the Axe of the Excellent Law, by which the monster of Self is utterly destroyed! . . . The best kind of a dream! My friend, I believe in the teaching of the Buddha."

And the Baku went out of the window. I looked after him—and I beheld him fleeing over the miles of moonlit roofs,—passing from house-top to house-top, with amazing soundless leaps,—like a great cat. . . .

NOTHING NEW

THERE is not much that is original in the world. About all that the best and bravest can do is to improve on details the main work has been laid out long ago. We have in this city a beautiful cathedral. We may be told that it was modeled after a much more costly one in the old world, but where did the architects in the old world obtain his model? We have to go

away back to the time when men first began to comprehend that there was a ruling power above them, and turned to that power in worship. The place they sought for their prayers and offerings was in the woods, where the trees were pillars and their sculptured tops made a shade for them. When they had erected their first rude altars there, they had completed the first cathedral. Later, improvements were made, but the plan remained the same, then after the coming of the Messiah and the conversion of Southern Europe was made, men began to think of grander places of worship, even as did Solomon when he built his temple. Still the original plan was not changed, there must be lofty pillars; there must be a shade above, and so the cathedral came into place, and its roof looked upon from below was sculptured in stone as delicately as were the branches of the trees that made the first cathedral. And as through the leaves and branches of the first cathedral glints of sunbeams swept down upon the first worshippers, so to continue the figure the cathedral windows were made of tinted glass, through which the sunbeams, separated into all their original colors, could enter.

The pictures, the sculptured images, the music and the incense were but improvements which came with increased intelligence, but none of them altered the original plan. Lest one walk about through the mighty pines of the high Sierras for an hour, then let him sit down and cover his eyes for a few minutes, with the deep murmur of the winds and the forest life around him, when again he looks up, it is hard for him, on the instant, to put aside the impression that he is in a cathedral grander than any earthly builders ever erected. Part of that is in the surroundings, part comes from descent from some far away ancestor who worshipped in one of those primitive temples before there was any history to record it. From this we may safely conclude that there is not much new in the world, nothing at least except an aeroplane and the steam engine. The wireless has been at work all the time, only modern men have learned some of its ways, and assumed partial control over it. About all that the ordinary mortal can do is to improve on the details which are given him, the original plans were patented long ago and he cannot if he tries change them. He may build a temple, but in that he is merely an imitator; he may place within it an altar chiseled and moulded with exceeding beauty, but the original plan was the rude pile of wood covered with earth which the fire could not consume. And then if bowed down by the helplessness which he knows is his and he essays to pray, then if he will read back he will find that David and Solomon could each offer an invocation in language that shames the best he can frame.

In carrying on diplomatic relations with Germany President Wilson humors Germany as the wife humored the husband who didn't get home from his lodge's annual banquet till 4 o'clock in the morning. The banqueter let himself in noisily, and then he began to growl and swear at a fearful rate down in the hall. "What's the matter?" called his wife. "Matter ish," the banqueter called back, "there's two hat-racks down here, and I—hic—dunno which 't hang my hat on." His wife laughed, and said in soothing tones: "But, dear, you've got two hats, haven't you? Hang one on each rack and come on up to bed. I know you're tired."

"What church does your new neighbor belong to?" the caller asked. "She's a utilitarian, I understand," responded old Mrs. Blunderby.—Boston Transcript.

"You never laugh at my jokes." "I wouldn't dare to." "Why not?" "I have always been taught to respect old age."—Baltimore American.